



CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

April 22, 2010

DCPS Loses an Incredible Educator - Saying Good-bye to Principal Betts



Two years ago I interviewed a principal recruit from nearby Montgomery County, Md. From the moment I met him, I knew I liked him. I even knew exactly where I would put him if we could lure him away from his successful school district to lead two struggling schools we were merging into one. It was a formidable challenge. Neither school had met federal baselines for performance for multiple years in a row, and to date, nobody had been able to change that.

Fortunately for us, Brian Betts was excited to take on the charge and he accepted the position of principal at Shaw at Garnet-Patterson. Students, families and staff were blessed and fortunate to have him in our lives until a [heartbreaking tragedy](#) last week took his.

What We Will Remember

News accounts testify to the enormous impact he had on the Shaw at Garnet-Patterson community. It was very clear that he believed in every single child in the school, and he was on the corner every morning and in all kinds of weather, to make sure they knew it. He knew all students' names, and he strove to learn something about each of them to better mentor and guide them.



He once sent personal notes on all 300 report cards going home in his first year. When his eighth graders felt the new and strange feeling of actual excitement to get up for school in the morning, they petitioned him to add a ninth grade to Shaw. He guided them to advocate for themselves, and they presented their proposal to me. They are still at Shaw at Garnet-Patterson this year.

These stories and more are everywhere, and many who knew Principal Betts continue to share [beautiful tributes on our website](#). Here are a few:

"There is nothing pretend or pretentious about him. I am glad he took a chance on DCPS and chose our district to leave his legacy of love, respect and belief for all children. I will miss him and I am blessed to have had the opportunity to work with him." - *DCPS Employee*

"Mr. Betts was a great man. He always made me feel safe at Shaw. If I got in trouble he would let me stay in his office and do my work. I always thought he could never die. He was one of the best men that I knew. Shaw loves you and we will always forever and ever!!!!!!" - *Student at Shaw at Garnet-Patterson*

"Brian was the rare person who could inspire both adults and children to action, who could cross lines of class and race with apparent ease, who could communicate the highest of expectations with kindness and love. Seeing Brian with his students inspired me to work harder as an educator." - *DCPS Employee*

"Mr. Betts inspired me to do the best I can do." - *DCPS Student*

Gratitude

Losing Principal Betts reminds me - in a most painful and powerful way - just how grateful I am for the principals, teachers, librarians, counselors and social workers, classroom aides, custodians, school and central office workers, and all of the employees who spend more energy than they had ever expected, in order to educate our district's children.

Far too many of our students face obstacles larger than I can imagine, and I am humbled every day by the work that you do. Thank you. We need you, and our children need you in their lives.

A Life that Left its Mark

On Friday a Shaw student asked me, "Chancellor Rhee, why would someone want to do this to Mr. Betts?" Of course, I had no good answer. With all of the unknowns about what happened to a man who one parent described as "larger than life," one thing is very clear. He taught his children well. The students I have spoken to understand exactly what Principal Betts would want them to do. They spoke many times of carrying on by creating what he wanted for their lives, and by pursuing the hard work and respect for themselves it will take to get there.

I am heartened by our students' courage in the face of such a tremendous and frightening loss, by the perseverance and love of the staff at Shaw at Garnet Patterson, and by the outpouring of support to Mr. Betts's family and to the school from a community that knows very well what we have lost.

But mostly what encourages me this difficult week is Mr. Betts's own reflection on his work and his choice to join DCPS. In a television interview in 2008, he was asked about the professional risk of accepting such a significant challenge to turn around a school in such a challenging district. What had he gotten himself into?

"I think to myself," he said, "I'm lucky to have gotten myself into this, because although I lose sleep, although I worry quite a bit, I really feel that I'm doing the right thing."

"No regrets?" the interviewer asked.

"Not a single regret."

As Mr. Betts said, "This is important work. It's work that needs to be done. Every day I go home exhausted, I lose a little bit of sleep. But I really feel I'm making a change in the world."

Indeed he was.

Memorial Service

We invite you to a [public memorial service](#) for Principal Betts on Saturday, May 1 at Strathmore Hall in Bethesda, Md.

We welcome you to [add your own memories of Principal Betts](#) on our website.

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